

“The Echo of God” ~ Christmas Day, 2011 10:30 a.m.

Luke 2:21 (Jesus was circumcised after eight days)

Luke 2:22-24 (Jesus was brought to Jerusalem for the purification ritual.)

Luke 2:25-35 (Old Simeon recognizes Jesus as the awaited-for Messiah, at the temple.)

Luke 2:36-40 (Prophetess Anna recognizes and praises Jesus, too.)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler

December 25, 2011

Redlands Firsts United Methodist Church

[Take mic to several persons, saying “what a beautiful” sweater, or tie, or coat a person is wearing...asking the story behind that piece of clothing, or what they got for Christmas.] I’m wondering whether anyone saw Santa’s boots go up the chimney last night. [Ask children]

There’s a little book titled *To the Lighthouse*, and it’s written by a famous author, Virginia Woolf. This book is not about Christmas, but a woman in the book named Lily has a dilemma on Christmas day. She sees a man whom she likes enter the room, and she wants to tell him how important he is, how much she appreciates him.

Have you had this experience? You see someone, especially on Christmas, and you want to tell them you love them or appreciate them?

Well, before Lily says anything at all, the man noticed that his boot laces were untied, so he bent over to tie his boots. Lily--who still wanted to tell him that she appreciated him--instead said “What Beautiful Boots.”

Lily was extremely disappointed in herself.¹ She blew it. She wanted to say, “I care about you,” but blurted out instead, “What Beautiful Boots.” **Hold that thought.**

Let’s talk about the Bible. We are going to hear four very short stories about Jesus, **all of which occur soon after Jesus was born.**

What do parents need to do soon after a baby is born, here in Redlands, California, in 2011? [Possible answers: birth certificate, insurance, car seat, inoculations, baptism, photos on the web]

There were certain things that Joseph and Mary had to do. Some of them were legal requirements; some were religious.

- First, when Jesus was eight days old, he needed to be taken to the Temple to be circumcised. [Someone is ready to read this from the congregation Luke 2:21.]

As an important part of the ritual of circumcision, Jesus would be **named**. Here when we baptize a child, we hold them in our arms and walk around this sanctuary as everyone sings, “Olive, Olive, God loves you,” Mary and Joseph’s little boy child was given the name “Jesus.” Remember that’s the name recommended by the angel of the Lord to Joseph months earlier.²

- Let’s hear the second passage, Luke 2:22-24. [Second person reads from pew.] The second thing that the parents of Jesus needed to do was to hold a ritual for the mother, Mary.³ After giving birth, a woman was considered “unclean” for a while and during that time she was not allowed to go into the Temple. After all the days of waiting, the mother would go to the Temple for what they called a “purification ritual.” The mother was supposed to bring with her as an offering a lamb and a little bird. But, if she couldn’t afford a lamb, she could instead bring two little birds. We just heard read from

the Gospel of Luke that Mary brought two turtledoves or pigeons, so Mary and Joseph must have been poor.

- All of us have run into someone and thought later, “Surely it wasn’t an accident that we bumped into each other.” When the holy family of three (Joseph, Mary, and Jesus) went to the Temple, there were two special people there: Simeon, an old man who was very faithful and Anna, a woman, a prophetess, who was perhaps 84 years old. Both of these people spent a good deal of time at the Temple. Let’s read about them [Luke 2:25-35 and Luke 2:36-40]

It was no accident that Anna and Simeon bumped into Joseph, Mary, and Jesus at the Temple.

Remember Lily, who wanted to tell the man who walked into the room that she appreciated him, but instead blurted out, “What Beautiful Boots”? Well Anna or Simeon could easily have gotten tongue-tied, just as Lily did. They could have said something like, “What a cute baby. What beautiful swaddling clothes.” However, the story that comes down to us over the centuries is that **Anna and Simeon did not make the same mistake Lily did, Anna and Simeon did communicate quite clearly their recognition of Jesus’ huge worth, his potential.** They praised Jesus, and they praised God for the birth of Jesus!

Actually, *Simeon surprised the new parents by his certainty that their child was the awaited-for Messiah.* Simeon could now trust that future generations were in good hands, God’s hands. Anna, too, gave a blessing.⁴ She praised God for what she believed this baby would bring to the world.

Well, “Everything required by the law of the Lord” was done...The family of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus could go home...to Nazareth. With the car seat securely fastened to their donkey, the blessings of the old faithful man and the old prophetess woman glued to their hearts; this family was ready for what was yet to come...

When I received a present this past week, I said, “Thank you, what a beautiful poinsettia!” However, what I meant was, “You are wonderful. I praise God for you.” I was just like Lily, I blew it. I was not like Anna and Simeon, who managed to say how much they valued Jesus and his parents.

I learned something, though, that has helped me, and may help you if you share Lily and my dilemma at times. Rabbis in the time of Jesus talked about what they called the “Daughter of God” or the “Echo of God.” These Rabbis were wise folk. They recognized that it’s not always easy to say what we mean, especially when what we mean is so important and so precious. According to the Rabbis, the **“Echo of God conveys our genuine but unspoken meaning.”**

So, when Lily said, “What Beautiful Boots,” the “Echo of God” would whisper in the man’s ear, “Lily appreciates you.” When we say, “What a lovely sweater,” there is an echo, too. It says, “You are precious.”

This doesn’t mean that we don’t need to tell each other we love you, or we praise God for you, but if *we can’t quite get it out*, or if we are down on ourselves because we messed up and didn’t say it right, then we can hope that the “Echo of God” communicates our care nevertheless.

If we’re on the *receiving end* of the comment, “What Beautiful Boots,” we might have to turn up our spiritual hearing aids, to hear that “Echo of God,” assuring us that the message *behind the one communicated to us* is “You are loved; you are precious.”

The circumcision, the purification of Mary, the blessings given by Simeon and Anna at the Temple, all took place *shortly after* Jesus was born.

Today we celebrate and sing that Jesus was born! As we say, “Merry Christmas,” “Delicious meal,” “How was the freeway?” or even “How are the Lakers doing?” we know that *our words have an echo*. That Divine Echo radiates gratefulness both for the birth of Christ’s presence in the world—and for each other.

¹ “To praise his boots when he asked me to solace his soul . . . deserves . . . complete annihilation.”

² This name declares his future as the one who will be called “Savior.”

³ A woman who gave birth was considered “unclean” for seven days if the baby were a boy (twice as long if the baby was a girl). Then the mother went through a time of purification for 33 days or 66 days. All that time she was not permitted to enter the Temple. After the 40 or 80 days, the mother was supposed to go to the Temple and to offer a lamb and little bird, or, if she were poor, she could instead give two little birds.

⁴ Some have said that Anna is a good bridge, representing a “widow” in Judaism and points the way to the church’s care for widows in Early Christianity